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Some Thoughts on Regionalization

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URBAN DEEDS / Chester E. Smolski

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Some thoughts on regionalization

Cooperation could save money for all districts

I have a fireplace in my house that I use on occasion. Since I use it infrequently and do not have adequate storage space for much wood, I have to buy the wood in small lots. This is very expensive.

I discovered on talking with some of my neighbors that they have the same problem, so we came up with a simple solution: Let's buy a cord of wood and split it amongst ourselves. So there it is, I get my wood at a cheaper price with the same level of service, and all that was required was that I cooperate with my neighbor.

Of course, if I want to be independent, I can continue to get the wood just when I want it, not have to bother with my neighbor, but pay the higher price. And this is exactly what most of the cities and towns in Rhode Island do—not in buying wood, but in supplying goods and services to their residents.

New Englanders pride themselves on their self-reliance, their fortitude, their independence and, some would say, their obstinacy. Generally good qualities, but they come at a price: not cooperating with others around you. And this has been a tradition in this part of the country since its founding.

But now the 39 cities and towns are faced with severe cutbacks in funding from federal and state sources, and major questions are being raised by taxpayers who are expressing their anger by voting to reduce all types of programs, especially that biggest expense in most communities—the schools.

Cooperation among communities is not a characteristic of the independent-minded New Englander, yet in these critical times, we have to explore all opportunities to reduce costs and at the same time maintain quality.

It is this type of opportunity that Lt. Gov. Roger N. Begin has been investigating over the past year and what prompted him to invite elected officials, businesspeople, agency representatives and others to gather in early June to examine this issue of regionalization.

This City and Town Intergovernmental Summit Meeting drew nearly 150 people to hear speakers who have experience in city and town regionalization, and to discuss local opportunities for cooperation between cities and towns. Workshops on public works, public safety, education and general services served as springboards for detailed discussion about these topics.

The overriding message that came through from speakers was, "We can no longer afford the government we have," and "Business as usual doesn't work anymore." That's right: Costs keep going up, but wages, if one is working, have not kept pace.

It is not easy to get poorer, for this is not part of the American dream, nor the experience of most of us in the post-war era. Yet this is exactly what is happening in this state and in this part of the country—we are poorer and can no longer afford many things that we have become accus-

tomed to having. And local government and local schools may have to undergo change as a result.

Regionalization, a joint service agreement between two or more bordering governmental units, is difficult to implement, according to one speaker, because of local resistance (protecting one's own turf) and because advocates lose interest as the economy improves.

When Gov. Sundlun stated that the whole state should be divided into six regional school districts, he certainly gained the attention of the electorate, but it appeared to generate more anger than thoughtful discussion. Appropriately, he softened his stand and will have a study commission report to him by next year on school regionalization.

There is little doubt that more school districts could be regionalized than the current three of Foster-Glocester, Exeter-West Greenwich and Chariho. In fact, when J. Troy Earhart, commissioner of elementary and secondary education, asked his audience at the lieutenant governor's meeting is anyone felt that no more regional schools should be established, not one single hand went up. But it was evident that many people objected to the magical figure of six that had been mentioned.

Commissioner Earhart gave many examples to illustrate cost savings when schools regionalize, whether buying paper or having selected services provided. And he also touched on what many see as a stumbling block, protecting turf. When comparing Catholic schools to public schools in the state, his figures indicated that while the public schools enroll eight times the number of students, they employ 33 times more administrators. Regionalization would reduce the number of administrators.

The commissioner's convincing statements on cost savings were not substantiated in a recent story in Providence Business News on costs at Chariho, which is made up of the three towns of Charlestown, Richmond and Hopkinton. But before one is convinced of these figures, one has to know what the experience of other regional school districts is, where costs are less or more and, most important, what are the quality and range of offerings and results from this type of organization, a point strongly emphasized in the education workshop.

Regionalizing schools is more than an economic issue; it is also highly emotional. For this reason, some school districts will continue by themselves, but schools are definitely one community service that should be explored for better quality and lower prices, something that regionalization may provide.

Certainly the time is right, and Lt. Gov. Begin has found a receptive audience that wants to know how to reduce governmental costs. Whether buying wood or paying for better schools, we can do better by cooperating with each other.

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